

Amakhala Game Reserve Experience

by

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Introduction

Being avid wildlife aficionados in general, and big cats fans in particular, we have talked about the possibility to something like Amakhala's Student/Volunteer Program for years, without really knowing how to go about realizing such an undertaking. Slightly less than a year ago we came across a newspaper article (in the Swedish free newspaper Metro) that described sundry volunteer programs, and after some "shopping around" we found World Wildlife Experience (in BBC Wildlife Magazine) and found Amakhala to be the most attractive for us (for several reasons, including it being located in a malaria-free area). Consequently, we booked four weeks, spanning between 3 November and 1 December, and after having spent one night in Cape Town, and one night in Port Elizabeth, we arrived at Paterson on Monday 3 November, and was greeted by the ranger David Fellowes and the students currently active within the program.

General impression

Although we came here with the intention and expectation to learn as much as possible about wildlife conservation and preservation, we can honestly say that our stay here (with only four days left) have far exceeded our expectations. We have learnt more about wildlife management than we ever dreamed of, and that not only included learning about animals and plants per se, but also economical and political issues and concerns, course programs, tourism and its inevitable "footprint" on the environment (not only bad, since it helps raise interest in preservation) and so on. We have increased our knowledge not only about our favorite animals (i.e. big cats, our main reason for this trip), but also about insects, birds, plants, and all other animals found on the reserve. Our ranger, David, has also helped us arrange trips to other reserves and sanctuaries, which has further increased our knowledge about African wildlife, on top of giving us a cornucopia of simply unforgettable experiences. In sum, our brains feel close to overload – in a good way!

The strongest moment

It is, of course, impossible to rank our experiences here at Amakhala, but we both agree that the perhaps most awe-inspiring moment of our stay here (and of our entire lives!)

was the first night we went out on the weekly combined anti-poaching/lion monitoring mission. After having searched for the lions for a substantial time (in the dark), we were about to call it a day (well, night) and head back home, when, all of sudden, the lions all appeared in the headlights of our Land Rover, feasting on a newly captured springbuck. The female adult and the three subadults were there, just a few meters from us, in the darkness of the African night. The male lion was vaguely seen a few meters to the left, resting in the grass. No walls between us and them, just African night, and compared to our daily encounters with the lions, this was a completely different experience! Here, at night, it was obvious who was in charge, whose “element” the African night is (not ours). Then Scar, the female adult, walked out a few meters to the right of the road, still just a few meters in front of our eyes, and vocally signaled her presence to whatever listeners might be out there, and that sound was quite likely the most eerie and humbling acoustic experience we have both encountered – and we are both “acoustically oriented”, being musicians (both of us) and a linguist/phonetician (Robert).

As we left, with the primeval sound ringing in our ears, we directed our torches towards the darkness, seeing the green reflections of big cats eyes staring back at us, and we were in total agreement as to who are the Masters of the Night at the savannah!
